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# Soviet Union Gains Momentum In Mideast as U.S. Policy Falters

## FOREIGN INSIGHT

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. is losing valuable points to the Soviet Union in the Middle East due to Mikhail Gorbachev's quiet diplomacy, consistent support for his allies and Washington's foreign policy blunders and lack of initiative.

Assistant Secretary of State Richard Murphy's weekend mission to Europe to meet with the Jordanian and Israeli leaders was the latest confirmation. Its purpose is to plan an international conference including the Soviet Union as backdrop for negotiations between Israel and a Jordanian-Palestinian delegation.

The idea is to remove Soviet obstacles to the peace process—chiefly applied through Syria—without letting Moscow have too central a role. But Soviet diplomats regard such a meeting as a firm foot in the door and as American admission that there can be no settlement without their endorsement.

Concerns about Soviet inroads in the Middle East aren't new, and they're often exaggerated by pro-U.S. Arab leaders trying to scare Washington into giving them more support. This time, though, there are new twists that make the Soviet challenge more formidable.

Some fear the Soviets may try to use the crisis over Libya to reestablish in the Mediterranean a strategic presence it lost a decade ago. Moscow already has 28 ships in the Mediterranean from its Black Sea fleet and is clearly hoping Col. Qadhafi feels threatened enough by the U.S. to provide them permanent port facilities.

"The Soviets have always wanted to erode U.S. influence in the region," says William Quandt, the Middle East expert at the National Security Council during the Carter years. "Quite frankly, now they might achieve it."

It's not that the Arabs want to become Soviet allies. The sad experiences of their Afghani Moslem brothers in Afghanistan and suspicions that last week's coup attempt in South Yemen might have been Soviet-inspired makes them want to stay at arm's length. They also can't get as much financial assistance or high technology from Moscow as from the U.S.

Still, many experts see Soviet gains from these recent developments:

● In the past six months, Mr. Gorbachev has established diplomatic relations with Oman and the United Arab Emirates, giving him additional political leverage and—not to be dismissed lightly—an opportunity to place more analysts and KGB agents in the region to promote Soviet interests and gather better intelligence.

● By and large, the Soviets also have reduced their support for revolutionary movements in the Middle East, leaving monarchs and presidents tranquil enough to think of better relations with Moscow. The simple fact is, Moscow saw that Communism just wasn't catching on in the region, except in South Yemen. Even there, last week's coup attempt gave the world a peak at how difficult it is for Moscow to control the only Arab Marxist state. Iran and Lebanon taught the Soviets that the only revolutionary roots in the region are Islamic and shouldn't be encouraged.

● U.S. Middle Eastern policy is in disarray. An administration source says the latest proof of that is the disagreement between Secretary of State George Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger over how big a stick the U.S. should wield over Libya. The source complains that there isn't anybody around to come between them and create a unified policy.

"We are essentially reactive and inconsistent," says Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser, who has supported Reagan administration policies in many parts of the world. "The Middle East is the one area where President Reagan has been least successful."

Whether they are right or wrong, Middle Eastern diplomats in Washington buzz that Soviet support of Libya, now made graphic by warships steaming to Col. Qadhafi's side, has been part of the reason the U.S. opted not to take military action against Libya.

In contrast, they inevitably add that U.S. support for its Tunisian friends did nothing to stop the Israelis from bombing a Palestinian headquarters that was only established after the U.S. had asked the country to give shelter to the refugees being forced out of Lebanon.

● The Soviets have proved that although they might not be able to help along a Middle East peace solution, they are good enough at scuttling progress through Syria that they must be included in the process. Even Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres is moving toward the idea of an "international forum" including Moscow to get things rolling.

Secretary of State Shultz wants to hold the Soviets to a strictly limited role, leaving the real negotiations to private sessions without the Kremlin.

The U.S. had a chance to keep Moscow out of the process altogether, but lost it because the administration wouldn't swallow inclusion of parts of the Palestine Liberation Organization. Now the idea is that the process would start with an international conference that would last a day or two followed by smaller working groups who would iron out details.

Washington in this way might still get away with negotiating a peace settlement behind the backs of the Soviets, but now the Soviets would need to endorse it and take some credit for it.

● Middle East hands are troubled as much by changing attitudes as events. Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak felt humiliated by the Reagan administration's heavy hand during the Achille Lauro affair. Jordan's King Hussein is embarrassed by the continued reluctance of Congress to give him the U.S. arms he wants; he is hence turning more to the Soviets who give him what he needs more quickly and with fewer strings. The Saudis complain that America's enemies in Syria get more polite treatment than its friends; Riyadh is also considering establishing diplomatic relations with Moscow.

U.S. academic foundations say they are having more trouble nowadays finding qualified Arab recipients for fellowships. Even the leading U.S. ally in the region, Egypt, can't find many good people who want to make their reputation in America.

"We just don't get people applying," says Mr. Quandt, the former National Security Council Middle East expert who is now at the Brookings Institution. "The word is out that it's not good for your career to be too closely tied to the United States."